University Innovation Through Quality Matters (QM)

by Suharnomo Suharnomo

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"Challenges of Creative and Innovative Management"

University Innovation Through Quality Matters (QM)

Daryono [ab] , Adi Indrayanto [b], Sigit Dwi Nugroho [b], Sri Supriyati [a], Syaiful Bakhri [a], Ahyar Yuniawanc, Fuad Mas'ud,[c], Suharnomo[c] and Sugeng Wahyudi[c]

[a] Ph.D Student of Faculty of Economics and Business, Diponegoro University
[b] Lecturer of Faculty of Economics and Business, Universitas Jenderal Soedirman
[c] Lecturer of Faculty of Economics and Business , Diponegoro University

Abstract

Universities face increasing demands from both internal and external constituents to engage in meaningful quality assurance to demonstrate the value and impact of their efforts. The expectations for quality assurance of online education are, perhaps, even higher, in view of its relatively recent development and the rapid growth of student interest. The Quality Matters Program, focusing on quality standards for online course design and a peer-based, course review process, is one manifestation of the response to this need. Given the resources and time required to make the Quality Matters process work, it is important to validate its positive impact on those who participate, on the design of courses and on student success. Quality Matters is a continuous improvement program for educational institutions to adopt and adapt in their efforts to assure the design quality of both online courses and online components of blended courses.

Keywords: Quality Matters, quality improvement and assurance, assessment, learning.

a INTRODUCTION

The quality of teaching is not simply determined by an individual's knowledge or ability, but also by the contexts in which teachers work. Improving teacher quality thus entails policies concerning recruitment, early preparation, retention (including attention to working conditions), as well as professional development. Quality teaching occurs when the teacher's ongoing analysis of the context, and the teacher's decisions about which pedagogical knowledge and abilities to apply result in optimum learning by students. All teachers are expected to meet the Teaching Quality Standard throughout their careers. However, teaching practices will vary because each teaching situation is different and in constant change. Reasoned judgment must be used to determine whether the Teaching Quality Standard is being met in a given context.

Most universities conduct annual staff appraisals which are generally linked to applications for salary increments, continuing appointment or tenure or promotion. Staff summarize their activities and achievements to line managers who make subjective judgments of their scope, quality and impact. Various teaching parameters are considered, the foremost being feedback from students using various instruments of evaluation. However, student perceptions of teaching do not always mean that effective learning has occurred. We need to develop better mechanisms to assess teaching quality other than to run popularity contests. Courses must undergo periodic review to remain contemporary and relevant, clients
need to be identified and consulted, graduate satisfaction and career outcomes need to be determined, and managers need realistic (not idealistic) data to allocate resources. Academics do not experience equity in teaching workloads as research and service commitments vary between staff.

Change is normal and inevitable. It should not be regarded as onerous or insoluble. We employ various educational models within our undergraduate and postgraduate courses; why not give the same
consideration to continuing education for academics? For example, I frequently use the SACK model to differentiate between educational domains (Skills, Attitudes, Concepts and Knowledge). We need to provide academics with essential teaching skills, change their attitudes from teacher-centred to student-centred to facilitate deep rather than rote learning, establish fundamental educational conceptions and provide knowledge of best practice. Small-group teaching in context does lead to better learning outcomes but it does have heavy resource implications in terms of staff numbers and class rooms.

The term 'cultural diversity' embraces differences of ethnicity, religion, language, and heritage; differences in national origin (including both the dicho to my between 'local'and 'overseas' students, and the manifold diversities within such student groups); and differences in experience (such as previous education). The result is that students approach education from different starting points. Yet, passionate and rigorous teaching must have defined goals, and thus the diverse body of students should share in an educational process aiming at a common outcome.

Two key challenges for educators in the modern university are:

1 To generate a meaningful exchange of ideas and interrelationships between students of different cultural backgrounds;
2 To meet the educational needs of all students effectively, and achieve unified goals, regardless of cultural background.

The University is committed to providing an excellent campus-based education and to the centrality of teacher-student interaction in this increasingly technological era. If the notion of a campus as an exciting place for students and their teachers is to survive, however, the teacher-student relationship needs regular re-thinking and re-emphasizing. Many of the academic staff teaching in universities are there because of the high quality of the teaching they experienced as students

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

It is our sincere hope that those using the

QM rubric will resist the temptation to use it as a simple behavioral checklist and instead use it as a launching pad to constructivist peer discussion leading to course improvement for the specific course under review

Figure 1. Quality Matters Framework *(Adopted from : Kay Shattuck, D.Ed.Director of Distance Learning Programs Blackboard Administrator Carroll Community College Westminster MD 410-386-8419)*

This mirrors what much of the distance education literature suggests as the direction offered by the interactivity available with today's communication technologies (Saba, 2005). General Review Standard: Assessment strategies use established ways to measure effective learning, assess student progress by reference to stated learning objectives, and are designed as essential to the learning process:

Eanes (2001)	provided a "task-oriented question construction wheel based on Bloom's taxonomy" that provides support for well constructed online assessment.
McLoughlin (2001)	suggested that evaluation tasks be associated with both learning outcomes and teaching approaches in order for the numerous characteristics of pedagogy to be supported in a cross-cultural setting
Wisher, Curnow, & Seidel (2001)	looked at knowledge retention in two distance learning course sections for the military and found it comparable with other classroom training. They conclude that distance education offers the potential of improving knowledge retention if frequent testing and spaced practice are incorporated.
Youngblood, Trede, & DeCorpo (2001)	identified a number of essential tasks for an effective teacher: make student welcome, clarify expectations for contributing online, clarify grading for the online participation, monitor participation in online discussion, keep discussion on track, contact students offline, bring closure to discussion, use questions to stimulate discussion, move discussion forward, stimulate reflection on students' comments, encourage students to build on others' contributions, and divide students into groups for specific tasks. Findings revealed that students felt clarification of grading and of expectations were most important.
Macdonald & Twining (2002)	looked at the relationship between assessment, student participation, and the development of skills. They suggested key

	issues for assessment of activity-based learning: assessment must reflect course philosophy, assessment is essential in creating learning opportunities at critical points, assessment provides a vital opportunity for feedback, helping to complete the reflective learning cycle.
Thurmond et al. (2002)	found that when students believe that their learning was being assessed in a variety of ways and that they were receiving timely feedback were among the strongest predictors of student satisfaction. The Annotations for Standard III.3 direct reviewers to look for evidence that students "receive frequent, meaningful, and rapid feedback" lists a variety of examples of how such feedback can be provided. This study supports the view that the online environment influences students' satisfaction rather than being solely a function of student characteristics
Achtemeier, Morris & Finnegan (2003)	found consensus among more than thirteen best practices instruments and the accompanying literature review that the text-based questions in online education should be worded clearly, simply, logical, not biased or leading, and each should stand-alone and address only one issue.
Koszalka & Ganesan (2004)	considered information, instruction, and learning design elements as identified in the webbased online learning literature and applied those to a course which was "initially a failure" (p. 243). Issues addressed were confusion of the learner when "haphazard integration" of CMS features "did not match course objectives"(Oliver, 1999; Kearsley, 1997; Collis, 1999; Grabowski & Small, 1997 were cited); "practice components were often weak or missing (Gilbert & Moore, 1998; Kidney & Puckett, 2003 were cited) (pp. 244-245) ; activities and resources did closely match instructional purposes (Kidney & Puckett, 2003; Koszalka & Bianco, 2001; Simonson et al., 2003 cited); and "learners did not see a connection between the activities they were completing" and the overall objective (p. 251).

Table 1. Literature Support

iii. RESULT AND ANALYSIS

The emerging Quality Matters-focused research follows trends of other online distance education research: It is dominated by non-interactive survey and questionnaire data collection "predictor variables" of student retention (defined as returned the following semester) that were extrapolated from institutional data (n=20,569) by the use of educational analytics. While the QM-focused research is to be applauded for establishing exciting baseline information in the first decade of QM's existence, specific challenges to be addressed are evident:

There is too much reliance on simple surveys without control or analytical follow-up. Using deeper learning analytical methodologies would add value to study outcomes. There are still

studies utilizing the publicly available, original 2005 QM Rubric, which has now been refreshed and refined three times (2006, 2008, 2011). Without using the current, official version of the QM Rubric, it is impossible to access the annotations (explanation and examples for each standard) which provide invaluable information to a reviewer on the 41 specific standards. In addition, lack of understanding of all facets of the QM process can result in the findings being misconstrued.

The QM project views support from the research literature as highly important for informing the continuous improvement process and for justifying changes made to effect improvements. It is hoped that compiling the available research literature as it relates to the QM rubric will have the following beneficial effects:1. Identify 'gaps' where research support is lacking or insufficient for general or specific review standards; 2. Suggest promising areas of research where additional empirical or conceptual support would improve the QM rubric and process specifically and advance the field in general; 3. Uncover new areas or promising directions based on current research trends.

IV. RECOMMENDATIONS

Studying student perceptions of quality and satisfaction with the experience of an online course is important; however, it is time for QM-focused research to include methodologies that can cross-tabulate or at least segregate other known factors, such as the impact of teaching, learner readiness, or student support services. Those factors can cloud an understanding of the impact of course design. Learning analytics methodologies would greatly assist with this goal.

Designing a study that is supported by a scholarly review of the literature is a must for QM-focused research to move from primarily exploratory in nature into theoretical and deeper. Expanding research by collaboration and inter-institutional sharing among colleagues in the QM community would promote the underlying principles of QM: collegiality, collaboration, and continuous improvement to promote student learning. The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning provides an excellent venue for that public process of instructors collaborating for the study of teaching and learning.

v. SUMMARY

It is an exciting time in online learning, but care must be taken to move forward with well designed, implemented, and analyzed research studies. Quality Matters, a program of course design improvement and evaluation, can be an important component in an institution's total quality improvement and assurance efforts. The hope is that this article will inform and encourage further research on improving online learning.

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